

Planning and Development Committee
March 14, 2014

Senate Bill 332: An Act Amending the Charter of the Metropolitan District in
Hartford County

Testimony Submitted by:

Mayor R. Scott Slifka
Town of West Hartford

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding Senate Bill 332. My name is Scott Slifka, and I serve as the Mayor of West Hartford, a member town of the Metropolitan District. I write in strong opposition to this proposed legislation.

As a fellow elected official, I am sympathetic to the concerns voiced by the legislators and their constituents that have served as the catalyst for this bill. Some of your constituents have been faced with an increased cost for a basic need, and you are rightfully investigating the reasons why. Were I in your position, I expect that I would be engaging in a similar exercise. But with a bit of distance and perspective from the issue, the facts demonstrate that the prescribed cure is worse than the disease, and it codifies a financial inequity for the thousands of residents of current MDC member towns. Furthermore, it creates a disincentive for regional cooperation at a time when municipalities need to increase our efforts to share costs and services across borders.

In order to become a member of the MDC, the residents of the Town of West Hartford were required to contribute infrastructure improvements worth several million dollars and pay a significant fee. At that time, the Town understood that becoming part of a larger regional entity carried with it some burdens along with significant benefits. The Town assumed certain obligations of the MDC, and lost a certain amount of autonomy and authority. Fortunately, and as one who has been an occasional critic of the MDC, I can say that whatever downside may exist with joining a regional entity such as the MDC is outweighed by the benefits; for example, we have enjoyed uninterrupted water and sanitary sewer services since becoming a member and we have worked with the MDC in coordinating our local paving program, improving our aging sewer system, and preserving recreation areas.

We understand that with membership in the MDC comes an ongoing obligation, along with our fellow members, to ensure that the system is maintained and compliant with all laws and regulations, and that the MDC, as a municipal entity, remains fiscally solvent. As you appreciate, we provide some services to nonmember towns, and, as should be expected, these nonmember towns (or customers within those towns) are charged for the cost of providing those services. The costs, in addition to the simple water rate, reflect the cost to bring water to their borders, maintain the system, and an equitable contribution to compensate for the cost of building the treatment and distribution system to which they otherwise have not been required to contribute. However, it is important to note that, despite these additional costs, these nonmember customers are not required to invest in the regional entity and they have not assumed

any part of the burden or risk of becoming a member, as eight other towns have elected to do.

The bill before the committee today mandates a number of things that are troublesome to me as a chief elected official of a member town. In Section 1, the requirement that the MDC be forced to charge the same rate to all customers is unfair to member towns. This disregards the risk that every member town assumes in its effort to provide the nonmember customers with the potable water that they require. In addition, it unfairly restricts the ability of the MDC to effectively manage its finances so that it can continue to provide the quality services to its member and nonmember customers at competitive rates.

Furthermore, the bill proposes to add four representatives from nonmember towns to the MDC Board of Commissioners. Allowing nonmember towns to share in the governance of the MDC sends the wrong message that a town can enjoy the benefits of regional cooperation but avoid all of the risks and burdens that are otherwise associated with developing those benefits.

In short, the bill creates "backdoor" membership for the nonmember towns. Moreover, it effectively causes the residents of the existing MDC member towns to subsidize the cost of water service to the non-member towns. And in several instances, the result is a subsidy of more affluent communities by more challenged ones. This strikes me as fundamentally unfair.

It is for these reasons that I strongly urge the Planning and Development Committee to reject S.B. 332 before you today. Thank you for your attention and consideration.